

Message Text

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TAGS: MARR, MILI, PARM, UK, NATO

SUBJECT: DEBATE ON DEFENSE REVIEW

REF: LONDON 25956

1. MUCH ANTICIPATED DEBATE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS ON DEFENSE WAS TELESKOPE TO ONE DAY AND HELD 16 DEC. DEBATE WAS LIVELY BUT RARELY ANGRY, WITH BOTH TORIES AND LEFT-WING LABORITES SEEMINGLY AWARE OF FUTILITY OF THEIR POSITIONS AND THE DIFFICULTY OF DIS-LODGING THE GOVERNMENT FROM THE COMFORTABLE MIDDLE GROUND IT APPARENTLY HAS CHOSEN. VOTES WENT COMFORTABLY IN THE GOVERNMENT'S FAVOR BUT FEATURED A LEFTIST REVOLT WITHIN LABOR RANKS THAT PRODUCED 54 VOTES AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT ON THE BASIC PROPOSAL TO "TAKE NOTE" OF THE DEFENSE PROPOSALS.

2. TORY CRITICISM OF THE DEFENSE REVIEW WAS LED BY
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PETER WALKER, SHADOW DEFENSE SPOKESMAN, WHO POINTED TO

THE UNWISDOM OF REDUCING DEFENSE SPENDING AND CUTTING MANPOWER IN THE FACE OF AN INCREASING WARSAW PACT THREAT. TORIES ALSO ATTACKED THE LIKELY EFFECT OF THE CUTS ON ALLIED SOLIDARITY, RELATIONS WITHIN NATO, TIES WITH COMMONWEALTH PARTNERS AND OTHER FRIENDS OUTSIDE EUROPE, AND ON DOMESTIC PREPAREDNESS AND EMPLOYMENT. THE TORY AMENDMENT "REGRETTING THAT THE PROPOSALS IMPERIL BRITAIN'S SECURITY" WAS DEFEATED BY A VOTE OF 316 TO 256.

3. SECRETARY MASON'S SEVEREST CRITICISM CAME FROM THE LEFT WING OF HIS OWN PARTY. THE TRIBUNE GROUP, LED BY IAN MIKARDO AND FRANK ALLAUN, HAD PUT DOWN AN AMENDMENT CRITICISING THE GOVERNMENT FOR CLAIMING TO BE MAKING CUTS IN DEFENSE EXPENDITURES WHEN AN INCREASE WOULD IN FACT OCCUR, COMMITTING BRITAIN TO CONTINUE TO SPEND A HIGHER PROPORTION OF ITS GNP FOR DEFENSE THAN ANY OF ITS MAJOR ALLIES AND FAILING TO RELEASE TO BRITISH INDUSTRY THE RESOURCES AND MANPOWER NEEDED TO SPUR EXPORTS AND ECONOMIC GROWTH. AFTER THE SPEAKER ANNOUNCED HE WOULD NOT CALL THE MOTION FOR DISCUSSION, SUPPORTERS REGALED THE HOUSE AT LENGTH STRESSING, INTER ALIA, THE IMMORALITY OF THE MAINTENANCE OF BRITAIN'S NUCLEAR DETERRENT FORCES, THE FAILURE TO TAKE ANY STEPS TO ABOLISH ALL FOREIGN NUCLEAR BASES (READ "HOLY LOCH") FROM THE COUNTRY, AND THEIR CONVICTION THAT ANY CONTINUED COMMITMENT TO "NON-BRITISH" DEFENSE (E.G., HONG KONG, OMAN, CYPRUS) IS UNJUSTIFIED.

4. THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE THROUGHOUT WAS LOW KEY AND SOLID. SECRETARY MASON EMPHASIZED THE PROVISIONAL NATURE OF THE DECISIONS, NOTED THE THOROUGH CONSULTATIONS BEING HELD IN NATO, AND STRESSED THAT THE CABINET WANTED ONLY TO STREAMLINE BRITAIN'S DEFENSE--NOT MAKE IT ANYTHING LESS THAN AN EFFECTIVE DEFENSE FORCE. HE AND DEFENSE MINISTER RODGERS HANDLED QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES FIRMLY AND GENERALLY EFFECTIVELY, OFTEN KEEPING THEIR HEADS DOWN AS TORIES AND LABOR LEFTISTS TRADED BLOWS OVER THE HEADS OF THE FRONT BENCHERS. THE RESULT WAS LARGELY ANTICLIMACTIC: LABOR'S LEFT WAS AS INEFFECTIVE IN MARSHALLING ITS SUPPORTERS AS IT HAD BEEN IN DOCUMENTING ITS UNCLASSIFIED

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CHARGES OF "PHONY CUTS"; AND THE TORY OPPOSITION ULTIMATELY ABSTAINED FROM THE VOTE ON THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM AND ACKNOWLEDGED, AT LEAST ON THIS OCCASION, ITS PREFERENCE FOR THE PROPOSED MEASURES TO LESS PALATABLE ALTERNATIVES THAT MIGHT SUBSEQUENTLY BE PUT FORWARD.

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